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AUTHOR Varnum, Robin
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ABSTRACT

Much existing historiography is either based too exclusively on the evidence of old textbooks or concerned too narrowly with theory or the epistemological assumptions underlying theory. Those who study the history of composition in this century need both to consult such new sources of information as course materials, student papers, and oral histories and to consider a broadened range of social and cultural factors that may have affected the teaching of writing. A study of a freshman writing course at Amherst College from 1938 to 1966 reveals the development of a remarkable course ("English 1 and English 2") that flourished at a time when the teaching of writing is supposed to have been all but stagnant. No textbook was used in the two semester, mandatory, boot-camp-type course. Relying solely on their own resources, Theodore Baird and his colleagues developed a sequence of questions requiring writing assignments at the rate of one each class period for a total of 33 assignments each fall and 22 each spring. Sequences were never duplicated; a new one was devised each semester. According to one informant, the point of this course was to encourage students to recognize that "control of the world and of themselves depends on mastery of language," which is not a surprising theme for a course during this nation's greatest economic and political power. (Contains a sample of 1946's writing assignments, four notes and nine references.) (TB)

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# The Need for a Cultural History of Composition: Reflections on an Amherst Study

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by Robin Varnum
121 Harvard St.
Springfield, MA 01109

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CCCC, Nashville, March 17, 1994

ED 376 464

Nancy, Sue, and I are here today to talk about historical scholarship in composition. We want to discuss both the evidence upon which histories are based and the ways in which this evidence is interpreted. Much existing historiography, I believe, is either based too exclusively on the evidence of old textbooks or concerned too narrowly with theory or the epistemological assumptions underlying theory. I believe that those of us who are studying the history of composition in this century need both to consult such new sources of information as course materials, student papers, and oral histories and to consider a broadened range of social and cultural factors that may have affected the teaching of writing. Looking at new information through new lenses might lead us to reevaluate teaching practices from the 1940s and 1950s and to revise the notion that a "paradigm shift" occurred in the 1960s. Much of what happened in the 1960s, it seems to me, can be explained as the results of the post-Sputnik educational reform movement, of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs, of open-enrollment policies, and of the rise of both research universities and community colleges.

The tendency among composition historians has been to look at practice in the classroom, or at materials and ideas presented there, without acknowledging the larger forces that created the classroom itself. Few historians have yet looked, as Sharon Crowley has pointed out, at "the

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repressive institutional situations which have shaped composition instruction since its beginnings" and which "mandate that most teachers of composition are (and always have been) part-time, untenured and untenurable instructors or graduate students" (247). Instead, as Stephen North has observed, historians have tended "to focus on a very limited number of features relevant to a history of the idea of teaching writing, located in an intellectual context, with a few institutional coordinates, but pretty much stripped of place and time in other ways" (77). Thus, according to North, we have no answers to such basic questions as: "Who learned to write? How many of them were there? How much did their teachers get paid? What kind of living was that? Were these teachers politically active? In what ways? How did these things vary across the country?" (77).

Part of the problem, as North has noted, is that the body of source materials "so far assembled is pretty small," and North says, "Historians have yet to look all that hard for more" (73). Susan Miller, who like North is a hero of mine, pointed out in a 1982 article that:

> "Most histories of composition teaching are histories of the use of textbooks -- of their printings, adoptions, rises and declines. Such histories inadvertently imply that composition pedagogy, classroom practices and methods, and writing courses in general have slavishly followed textbooks and that the way to change the teaching and learning of composition necessarily depends on changes in composition textbooks" (22).

I would argue that textbook-based histories place disproportionate emphasis on the "content" of instruction, or on the "what" rather than the "how," which is ironic in a field notorious for the nebulousness of its "content." Textbook-based histories, moreover, tend to characterize composition as a static and rule-governed field.

But before I go any further, I need to tell you a little about my own study[1] of a staff-taught freshman writing course directed by Theodore Baird at Amherst College from 1938 to 1966. Naturally, I consider it to have been a remarkable course, and all the more so in that it flourished at a time when the teaching of writing is supposed to have been all but stagnant. Perhaps its most remarkable features are that it employed a sequenced series of writing assignments, that it called upon students to write frequently and from experience, and that it used student writing as the material for classroom discussion. It also served as a training ground for several young instructors such as Walker Gibson, Roger Sale, and William E. Coles Jr. who later became prominent in the field of composition studies. My history of this two-semester course, which was generally listed as English 1 and English 2, is based on a wide range of published and unpublished documents and on oral histories I collected from fourteen participant observers,[2] including Theodore Baird, who either taught the course or undertook it as students. The Amherst College Archives has five large storage boxes in its English 1-2 Collection full of such things as course syllabi, assignment and examination questions, staff memoranda, and student papers.

No textbook was ever used in English 1-2. Instead, Baird and his staff collaborated on generating their own materials and assignments. Baird

told me that the heart of the course was the assignments, and he acknowledged that they were difficult. They were developed in sequences that began somewhere and generally led somewhere else and then administered at the rate of one each class period for a total of thirty-three assignments each fall and twenty-two each spring. Sequences were never duplicated; a new one was devised each semester.

I have a handout for all of you listing a selection of the assignments that were used in the fall of 1946.[3] I don't want to spend much time going over them but just to give you documentary evidence that English 1-2 was both an intelligently designed course and very challenging for students. Let me note briefly that the central questions of the 1946 sequence were "What does it mean to perform a technique?" and "What does it mean to learn?" Let me note also that although English 1-2 students were not called upon routinely to revise their papers, opportunities for revision were built into the sequence at several junctures. I hardly need to point out that the workload for both students and instructors was intense. Students had to write three papers per week and instructors, who generally had twenty students per section, had to read sixty papers per section per week.

You might wonder: "What was the point?" One of my informants (Craig) told me that students came "to us with very strange and very harmful presuppositions about language. What we tried to direct their attention towards was language as that which controls your experience." Another informant suggested that the course had encouraged students to recognize "that the world they live in is the world they express in words" and "that control of that world and of themselves depends considerably on their

control of their own words" (Gibson 146). The English 1-2 staff understood the connection between language and power, and it is not surprising that English 1-2 flourished at an elite liberal arts college during the period of this nation's greatest economic and political power.

My informants describe Amherst College at mid-century as a comparatively isolated, almost monastic institution. It was a men's college in those days, and its student body was relatively homogeneous with respect to age, ethnicity and social class. Many Amherst graduates went on to become successful doctors or lawyers or corporate executives.

Theodore Baird had very strong views about the purpose of a liberal education. In 1938, the year that English 1 came into being, Baird was a member of the Curriculum Committee at Amherst College. He disagreed publicly with biology Professor Otto Glaser about the wording of a General Report issued by the Curriculum Committee on November 10, 1938 (reprinted in Babb et. al. 117-127). Glaser, who was the principal author of the Report and no doubt a behaviorist, had observed that human inquiry was "prompted by instincts" and rewarded, when successful, with "pleasure and satisfaction" (121-122). His implication seems to have been that human beings were subject to the same kinds of conditioning as Pavlov's dogs. When Glaser observed that "From the naturalism of our own creation and age, there is little opportunity to escape" (121), Baird protested, declaring:

> "It is for me a matter of faith that Amherst College exists to combat (not escape, least of all accept) the naturalism of our own creation and age. I also believe that human beings are

> unlike all other creations of nature in their intelligence. This faith, which I know is central to the teaching of some of my colleagues, I had supposed was commonly shared by the Faculty. Furthermore, I believe that there is certain experience which is peculiarly human, and that it is knowledge of this experience which is called liberal, as belonging to a free man. . . . What freedom of mind is this which Professor Glaser mentions if the mind is a slave to heredity, environment, economic forces, glands, the spirit of the age, neuroses, nature itself?" (122-123).

What has been wonderful for me about doing a sort of thick description of English 1-2 is that I keep discovering gems like that in the most unlikely places. Baird's statement that I just read you is a footnote to the curricular Report of 1938. And it reveals so much, because throughout his tenure at Amherst College, Baird would continue to insist that the object of a liberal education was to liberate a student's imagination and to enable him to speak for himself. To give you another example, in a memorandum he mimeographed for his staff on July 19, 1960,[4] Baird explained:

> "we are concerned with placing the student in a position by means of our assignments and classroom discussion where he may learn something about himself as a writer. . . . We ask him to be introspective, to look within for just a moment, and generally speaking he complies with reluctance. After all, who

is this freshman? We do pay him the highest compliment, if he only knew it, by insisting over and over again that he is an individual. Who are you? Why can't you talk in your own voice?"

As I read that, the student is conceptualized as one who must find his voice and win his right to speak authoritatively. His teacher was to function more or less as his sparring partner and should not concede him any easy victories. My alumnus informants tell me that English 1-2 represented a sort of symbolic ordeal. It was also an obligatory rite of passage because during the twenty years following World War II, it was one of several core courses required of all freshmen. The curricular plan which governed Amherst College from 1947-1966, and which was known then as the "New Curriculum," was described by an Amherst history professor in 1978 as having been "more demanding, more rigid in its requirements, and less tolerant of diverse student interests than the program of any competing liberal arts college" (Greene 301). The men who designed Amherst's New Curriculum in 1945 must have been reluctant to relax wartime discipline. Although their plan called for an unusually heavy course load for freshmen (Kennedy 185), the students who first encountered its requirements in 1947, many of whom were returning veterans, not only took them in stride but also established a smart pace for their successors to follow. I suspect that cold war militancy operated to keep standards high.

Under the New Curriculum, all Amherst freshmen were required to register for English 1 in the fall and for English 2 in the spring. This curricular

requirement, together with Baird's decision that he and his staff would administer a common set of assignments, resulted in a situation compelling every member of each year's freshman class to puzzle, assignment by assignment, over one set of questions. Each new question thus represented a sort of campus-wide event and was discussed in dormitories and dining halls as well as in classrooms. English 1-2 was every student's introduction to the college, and it was enormously instrumental in forming the identity of each new Amherst class. One faculty informant (Pritchard) told me that "students often made an analogy between the course and boot camp."

Another informant (Dizard) says that "the Amherst faculty in the 1940s and 1950s saw itself as presiding over a boot camp and took some delight and satisfaction in terrorizing students." If a paper was due at noon, for example, and it came in at five past, it was not accepted. Instructors often wrote scathing comments on student essays, and they were not shy about handing out Cs and Ds. Sometimes, they read "stupid" writing aloud in class. One alumnus remembers that "the really mean comments became legend in the dorms, like the time somebody's professor . . . handed back a set of essays and one student discovered that of the three paragraphs in his essay, the first two had been completely crossed out, and the third had been cut out with a scissors." The professor told the student, "The first two paragraphs were so bad I had no choice but to cross them out. Then the third paragraph was EVEN WORSE" (Boe 6).

Amherst alumni who survived English 1-2 during the New Curriculum years tend to take great pride in the fact that they survived. One of my informants, who presently teaches sociology at Amherst College, speculates

that "alumni extol the famous 'old [New] curriculum'" because they learned from it "that they could meet challenges, juggle an impossibly large and conflicting set of demands, and -- despite inner turmoil -- keep up a good front" (Dizard 156). In the 1940s and 1950s, this informant says, Amherst College operated as a kind of meritocratic sieve, testing the metal of society's future leaders. The ethos of the institution, however, has changed a great deal since the 1950s. "Students," according to my informant, "no longer assume that getting in" to Amherst College "and doing well means that they've got it made for life." "The anxiety and the driven-ness that one senses" in students now, he says, comes less from "the desire to avoid being publicly excoriated by some imperious professor" than "from the general perception that it's a profoundly competitive world out there."

Another informant (Cameron) says that the change in institutional ethos is evident in a couple of slogans. "The slogan for what the college was trying to do" in the 1940s and 1950s was: "to create a well-rounded student." The slogan that is used now by the admissions and public relations people is: "we are trying to create a well-rounded society." The change in slogans can be explained in part by a change in demographics. Amherst College has become coeducational, and its student body is much more diverse ethnically than it was in the 1940s and 1950s. The other side of the coin is that there is little consensus among the present faculty with regard to curricular matters. Those teaching English, in particular, seem more ambivalent than Baird and his contemporaries about their own relations to power. They seem much less certain about what it is they are trying to do to and for students. Whereas Baird believed in the power of education to

liberate the imagination, many of his successors in the 1990s seem to believe that the imagination is constrained by culture and by such factors as gender, ethnicity, and social class. I personally have much less confidence than Baird seems to have had in the power of an individual to take control of his or her world.

I believe that English 1-2 was rooted in a particular social and cultural context and could not easily be adapted to new contexts in the 1990s. Anyone who tried to resurrect the course now would probably be up on harrassment charges in two minutes flat. And any junior faculty person trying to satisfy a tenure committee today would find it very difficult to read sixty composition papers per section per week. But having said all this, I still say there's a lot to admire in English 1-2 and a lot we can learn from it, and maybe from other courses of its period. If more historians undertake the kinds of methods I have been outlining, and if we can collect more oral histories and dig into more archival collections, we stand to learn a great deal about how the teaching of writing has been understood to fulfill particular social and cultural functions at particular moments in history.

## NOTES

1. I published the results of my study of English 1-2 in 1992 in the form of a dissertation (A Maverick Writing Course: English 1-2 at Amherst College, 1938-1966, University of Massachusetts at Amherst). I am currently revising the dissertation for wider publication by the National Council of Teachers of English.
2. The names of my faculty informants are as follows: Theodore Baird, Amherst College (Emeritus); John Cameron, Amherst College; G. Armour Craig, Amherst College (Emeritus); Jan Dizard, Amherst College; Walker Gibson, University of Massachusetts at Amherst (Emeritus); Dale Peterson, Amherst College; William Pritchard, Amherst College, and Roger Sale, University of Washington. My alumni informants are: Robert Bagg ('57), Thomas Looker ('68), Geoffrey Shepherd ('57), John Stifler ('68), and Douglas Wilson ('62).
3. The complete sequence of these assignments may be found in Box 1, English 1-2 Collection, Amherst College Archives. For information about the English 1-2 Collection, please write: Daria D'Arienzo, Archivist, Amherst College Library, Amherst, MA 01002.
4. The excerpted passage occurs on page 3 of "Memo to the Instructors, July 19, 1960," Box 1, English 1-2 Collection, Amherst College Archives.

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(Accompanying Hand-Out)

English 1-2 Assignments for Fall 1946
(Box 1, English 1-2 Collection, Amherst College Archives)

1. a) Reflect on your resources for writing in English 1-2 and make a list of subjects -- from experiences outside the classroom -- you know you know. b) Select one in which you claim special expertness. c) Give reasons to support this claim. Write a paragraph, one page maximum, in which you write out a) b) c) as you would an "English paper."

2. Write a paper, two pages, demonstrating or displaying this expertness.

3. Tell how you might improve assignment #2 if you were to rewrite it.

4. Write a paper on an action you have repeatedly performed with distinction. Tell exactly how you performed this action on a particular occasion.

5. How did you learn this action (#4) ? What did you do to learn? Define "learn" in this context.

6. Write a paper on an action you performed once and only once with distinction, an action you performed once but were unable to repeat. Tell exactly how you did it.

7. Rewrite assignment #4.

8. Contrast papers written for #6 and #7 (technique and fluke) and make a list of differences between a technique and a fluke.

9. Make a list of key words with definitions (a vocabulary) for this course to date. Do not use a dictionary.

12. Rewrite assignment #5 in light of your present understanding of "learn."

13. Rewrite any paper you wish.

15. Describe exactly the situation (circumstances, time, place, persons) when you learned something from another person, a coach or a teacher, at the moment when you became aware that you had learned it. What had the coach or teacher done to teach you? What did you do to learn?

24. Describe exactly a situation (place, time, circumstances) in which you taught someone something he needed to know. What did you do to teach him? What did he do to learn? How do you know he finally succeeded in learning? Point out some things which are unteachable. What kind of experience can be taught?